



**Bhattacharya's Progressive Attitude towards Women
in The Context of Socio-Economic Patterns of Contemporary Society:
A Perspective through Bhattacharya's Music for Mohini**

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Bhabani Bhattacharya is a prolific writer with a great creative faculty of portraying socio-realistic vision of life through his novels. He is the well known Indian novelist writing in English during 1950's and thus, has been a contemporary of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. He deeply believes in the dictum that 'Art must serve a didactic purpose' or it must have a social and moral function to make people realize the worth of moral values.

He has a very sensitive and conscious approach towards the social issues of the time. His concerned outlook towards the social problems of the time was actually an inspiration from Mr. M. K. Gandhi, as Gandhiji's utmost effort was 'to wipe every tear from every eye'. He loved his practical approach of dealing with the social problems. He was also much influenced with Gandhian views on the empowerment of women in the context of socio-economic issues. Gandhiji worked greatly not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for the liberation of suppressed and for awakening of women, to rise them to dignity and self-respect. He always had a strong belief in the priority of social over political ends. Being inspired, Bhabani Bhattacharya remarks: "*our political freedom is worth little without social uplift*".(1) He exclaims:

"Great and exciting days lay ahead. India, free to build up her destiny, was not yet truly free. She was like a prisoner held too long in a dark cell. Unchained and released suddenly, she was bewildered by the light."(2)

Besides Gandhiji, he was also much influenced with the towering personality of political philosopher and renowned author Harold Laski, who left a profound impression on his personality and writings. Moreover, Tagore and Nehru were also the ideals of Bhabani Bhattacharya. In his novels we find an acute knowledge of social scenario of 1950's, as the topic of his Ph.D dissertation was 'Socio Political Currents in Bengal, A Nineteenth Century Perspective'.

He has six novels to his credit. Amidst all his novels, Bhattacharya's second novel *Music for Mohini*, which was published in 1952, is remarkable here, as the novel is purely social fable and it brings forth the need of social freedom in society. Through the novel Bhattacharya proposes that it is the time to reorient our national life on a new social basis. Although India got political freedom in 1947, yet the nation could not unbound itself from the web of superstitions and orthodoxy even after liberating itself

from British Empire. Old traditions and worn out customs were yet existing in society and checking the growth of nation and hampering the development of Women, who has always been the major victims of these social fetters. Women's freedom from such shackles was necessary for the emancipation of the nation. Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* is concerned or related with almost all socio-economic issues regarding women's plight during pre and post independence era and the tragic predicament is this that these issues still remains in society more or less and plaguing us. As Jayadev, the male protagonist, proclaims the need of the hour: "*I want to make Behula a model village- socially.*" (3)

In *Music for Mohini* there are two groups of characters the first type is the old people with their orthodox ways and rigid outlook, like Mohini's Grandma and her Mother in law and other being, like Jayadev, Mohini and Harindra, a group of youngsters in village Behula, who are the supporters of new value pattern that suits the modern age. They are progressive beings, who want to create a social setup based on justice and gender equality. Mohini is the female protagonist and the prominent character in the novel. She is a convent educated girl and a gifted Radio singer, who lives in Calcutta with her grand mother, father and brother. Her grandmother is a rigid lady of conservative thinking. She is above seventy and a firm supporter of old and established value system. She very often quarrels her son, Mohini's father, who is a professor and liberal in his view and outlook. He wants to bring up her daughter in a modern way. But whenever he wants to move away or shirks a little from old beliefs, Grandmother blackmails the family by saying:

'Send me away to the holi city. Let me not take one more mouthful of your food or even drink one sip of water in this house'. (4) Then the father pacifies every time by saying: *'Better let her have her own way in the house'.*(5)

The situation becomes heightened, when Mohini approaches to seventeen years and no horoscope is yet made for her. Grandma used to remind her son: *'listen,.....Bear this in mind, night and day, asleep or awake; our mohini is of marriage age'.*(6) In chapter four of the novel we see that the whole family is concerned about the suitable match for Mohini, especially it is a matter of great concern for her grandmother that Mohini is approaching to a marriageable age and yet no suitable match is found for her. She expresses her concern:

"Ever since the day the father pulled his girl's ears, he has known no hunger nor thirst nor ease nor peace; from waking to sleeping he has but one thought: a match for Mohini ."(7) she also adds: *"Can*

the tongue relish rice and fish, can the eyelids close in peace while there is a maiden daughter in the house” “And she shooting up like a palm- tree”, added heeralal, Mohini’s brother, recalling a talk in low tones between his elders, which he had overheard’.(8)

Thus, through the character of Grandma, Bhattacharya reveals the women’s plight in contemporary society. Grandma is used to remind Mohini that a girl does not belong to her paternal house. She tells that a girl is born and brought up only to become a lamp in a stranger’s house.

Even today in most of the sections of the society, the height of a girl is not taken as an attribute of hers because she should be preferably smaller in size than her would be husband. The daughter of marriageable age is a matter of concern for a major section of society even today. The people are not ironically concerned regarding the career orientation and grooming of the female child to make her talented, skilled and refined. They are only studied and groomed to match someone not in excel in personality. A proper match is in the hands of divinity, but to make a girl more strong and capable is no doubt a parents’ concern, so that they can better cope up in the harsh situations of life. In this regard, the outlook of contemporary society is clearly revealed through the comment of Grandma:

“You will brighten another house, child. What use is a lamp, golden and filled with oil, if it has no wick? The house is the lamp, man is like oil, the woman is the wick, Mohini, and happiness the living flame.”(9)

This was the lesson given to females when approaching for marriage. Life is not smooth and easygoing always, not in this home and not in that home, so the girls should be trained in such a manner that they can face the dire situations of life boldly. These days in many societies, we don’t suppress the feelings and wishes of the female child, but when she is going to her in laws, we teach them the lessons of tolerance, forbearance and patience, advise them to sacrifice their own wishes, learn them to leave their own ways and be adaptable.

In the big house of Behula, Mohini’s mother in law is quite stern and dominant. Dignity, authority and trust, these three attributes are the basic principles of her life. She wants to convert an easy, carefree girlhood into a big house’s mistress, so there are no end of prohibitions for Mohini. She is forbidden to wear dark, bright coloured silk saree and artificial or glass jewellery of her choice. She is even refused to make use of cosmetics, and hair style of her choice, rather she is advised to wear plain cotton saree and an old hair style of oiling and dragging the hair back, to add grace and dignity to her character and personality.

Bored and fretful, when one day she walks out of her house into the garden to give a free vent to her feelings. At once, she losts in the world of freedom. On a sudden impulse, she pulls her sari above her

ankles with a quick look around to make sure no one was about, climbs to a bunch of Jamrul, sits on a smooth branch, dangling her legs with proud satisfaction and thus, leaving the cloak of dignity aside to taste the fruit of Jamrul.

Bhattacharya explains: *“It was the fruit of Jamrul she ate, but something more too, the fruit of release, the fruit of freedom ; contentment filled her spirit and no fruit had ever tasted so sweet.”*(10)

Then at once her eyes were casted upon her mother in law, waiting at stairhead. She objected: *“No mistress of the big house in the last thousand years would have climbed a tree ever, why don’t you ask a servant to get you the fruit.”*(11)

Mohini feels miserable but the situation becomes unbearable for Mohini, when she is even refused to sing a song of her choice, the mother of the big house objects: *“These modern songs make no sense, you have such sweetness in your voice . Why not use it for religious lines.”*(12) The denial of music for Mohini was intolerable. Mohini’s anger knows no bounds at such a senseless restriction. She throws her musical instrument against the wall and passionately sobs by saying: *“why don’t I die?”*(13)

When Jayadev feels that Mohini is suffocating amidst the old unreasonable value systems. He favours her:

“Let the young mistress have her fun. Let her tell fancy stories to the girls. She, our pride and joy, has the right surely to amuse herself.”(14)

Sudha, another character in the novel is also deserted due to irrational beliefs prevalent in contemporary society. Her marriage is postponed because of her father’s strong belief in star conjunctions and future predictions. She has been called saturn’s eyesore by the neighbouring people. Mohini says, *“We have made a mess of her life. The village has wronged her- none of us individually. It’s our plain duty to rebuild it”.* (15) Her circumstances and bitter experiences made her a social rebel. When Harindra, a bold selfless youth at last wants to marry Sudha, the rock-like barriers of cast comes forward.

The attitude of the people from the groomside, when they come to visit Mohini and her family is also remarkable here and revealed by Bhabani Bhattacharya in a sarcastic manner. They make an inspection of the girl. Bhattacharya describes:

“Four pairs of eyes surveyed the girl from foot to head. She had to walk a few steps at the mother’s biddings to prove she did not lack grace of movement. They fumbled with prettily arranged hair and unloosed it down her back to know its length. They rubbed her face with their hands to make sure the fair complexion was natural,not of paint. Mohini gulped down her tears of shame when the woman stopped to pull her sari to the knees to inspect the shape of her ankles and legs.” (16) Her father cried with a sharp anger in his voice: *‘you are ill-mannered vulgar folk, unfit to set foot in a decent house, Get out’* (17)

Mohini's father is resentful with this ridiculous treatment of groom's party. Mohini also suffers due to loss of dignity. Though Grandma also feels hurt with these words of shame and scorn from groomsides, yet she defends it by saying: "*peasant girl and princess alike bear this ordeal. What other way is there, Mohini?*" When Mohini complains for the insulting treatment and her loss of self

dignity,(18) Grandma retorts: "*Dignity? In our hindu society a maid is addressed as Laxmi, the gracious goddess. Married she walks into her new household proud as the Devi.*"(19)

Thus, Bhattacharya reveals the hypocritical behaviour of society towards women. On the one hand, she is addressed as laxmi, the gracious goddess and on the other, she is inspected in this vulgar manner.

Besides this, widowhood was also regarded inauspicious at that time. Their presence was unwelcomed on happy occasions. When Mohini comes to her in laws house firstly after marriage, everybody was present at the ritual of reception except her mother in law, who was a widow. Mohini's grandmother also hides herself at the moment of Mohini's departure to her in laws' house. The presence of widow is not welcomed even today in many rural areas, and if they participate, they hesitate and remain guilty in conscience.

Thus, we see that woman had to compromise with her dignity and repress her self time and again in the society, the conditions are changing undoubtedly, but not much better even today. If we observe the present day scenario, the basic issues regarding women upliftment like child marriages, female foeticide, malnutrition in female child are yet remain unresolved. Many milestones are achieved, but a lot of improvements are awaited. The views and suggestions of Gandhiji on this issue of awakening of woman are remarkable here. As he says that the countrymen should respect the tradition of society, but not at the cost of loss of individual dignity. He gave this valuable advice: '*It is good to swim in the water of tradition, but to sink them is suicide*'.(20)

Bhabani Bhattacharya's characters seem to follow this point of view. Jayadev, the mouthpiece of Bhattacharya, is a man with liberal ideas and rejects all irrational beliefs and saves Mohini from being a victim of old unreasonable ways of her mother, he says: "*There is no room in the big house for crazy beliefs. The village looks to us for ideals and a way of living*". (21) The winds of positive changes we feel in the novel, when Jayadev strictly tells Mohini that she should not submit to these false beliefs. At this Mohini reminds the saying of her father:

"Do not bow down to such insult. You are the new India. The old orthodox ways have been our yoke, have enslaved us. Let us be free."(22)

To conclude, we can say that Bhattacharya advocates for a new social setup for women, free from dead conventions and blind beliefs and based on reason and mind. He remarks:

“social slaveries were cactus growths that would renew themselves over and again unless the roots were cut, roots that were deep in economic bondage..... ”(23)

According to Gandhiji, ‘woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities’. (24) So she has the right to be nurtured, groomed and behaved alike, as women’s growth is possible, if from the beginning phase of life they are loved , nurtured and treated alike by people around them.

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